DEAR GOD, HELP!
November 27, 2005

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 80:1–7
Isaiah 64:1–2
Mark 13:32–36

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."
Isaiah 64:1 (NRSV)

> Lord, that we are alive,
> that food is delicious to the taste,
> that the ground is firm beneath our tread,
> that rest can compensate for toil,
> that the Earth is fair and all her children blessed,
> your name be praised.
> We thank you for friends who care,
> for ways that open when every door seems shut,
> for the reality of forgiveness—human and divine. . . .
> We thank you for yourself—ground and source of every good—
> and especially for your love, that no resistance can diminish,
> and no need exhaust.
>
> Ernest T. Campbell, "Advent" from
> *Where Cross the Crowded Ways: Prayers of a City Pastor*

The waiting began, I recall, around Thanksgiving with the arrival of the first Christmas catalogs. There is nothing quite as exquisite, almost painfully delicious, as a child's waiting for Christmas. They used to be very modest catalogs—Sears, JCPenney, Montgomery Ward—almost pathetic catalogs by today's standards when three, four, sometimes six gorgeously elegant, artistic, compelling catalogs are arriving in the mail daily, full of dazzling delights. Those modest catalogs, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on television, the first Christmas carols on the radio, launched the great time of delicious waiting.

In a new book, *Secrets in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner remembers in his eloquent way his own childhood waiting, how his grandparents

used to send him an Advent calendar with little windows to be opened every day revealing a toy, a candy cane, a teddy bear. He could feel the excitement in the pit of his stomach as it got closer and closer to December 24 and he opened the little door and inside there was a stable and a baby asleep in the straw.

Buechner is in his 70s now, and he still remembers how

> on Christmas morning we would drive into New York City, where our grandparents lived, and along with my father's two brothers and their families we would start waiting all over again in the dim hallway of our grandparents' apartment—until finally our grandfather appeared and opened [the door] onto unutterable magic—a whole Arabian Nights' worth of treasures with the lights of the tree glimmering and cider and German Christmas cookies. And so many presents they had to set them out all around the walls with a pile for each of us marked with our name. It was worth vastly more than all the weeks we had spent waiting for it, and though I've long since forgotten almost every present I ever got, I remember still the dazzling light of it and the presence of all those people I loved and who loved me, and the feeling that life simply could never get any better than this, and the almost unbearable excitement of it.

But, Buechner remembers now, there was darkness in that room as well. Not long after his father committed suicide, his grandfather died of a broken heart, and a few years after that, his father's youngest brother committed suicide too.

"There was not Christmas enough to save the day," he writes. "There was not Christ enough—not just for my family back then, but for all of us, now and always" (*Christian Century,* 13 December 2005, page 34).

And so Advent begins with a cry for help. Right in the midst of all the bright lights and color, the exquisite excitement, the wonderful festivity, the words of an ancient prophet, almost like the rude ring of an alarm clock: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." "Dear God, help me, please"—the basic, primal human prayer, which, sooner or later, every one of us prays.

We find ourselves in an awkward spot here this morning. The culture around us is already in the midst of a remarkable year-end festival. Our retail neighbors have been waiting for this moment all year. They will do hundreds of millions of dollars in sales in the next four weeks, and given the stock market's recent rally, it promises to be a very happy holiday indeed.

The awkwardness is caused by the church's centuries-old wisdom that the best way to prepare for Christmas is to wait in the darkness for a while and to acknowledge our need and join the universal human experience of waiting and to pray that most human prayer, "Dear God, help!"

Advent texts around the world this morning are from the prophet Isaiah, about a time six centuries before the birth of Jesus when God's people were in a mess, an indescribable tragedy, actually. Their nation was gone, their proud army defeated, their beautiful city with the magnificent temple, destroyed, burned to the ground. And they, the fortunate survivors, were in Babylon, held captive.

From back in ruined Jerusalem one of them, an elegant poet, a prophet, wrote, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." O that you would show the Babylonians who's in charge. O that you would come and put things right again, fix what's wrong. O that you would come with justice, punish the wicked, and reward the righteous. O that you would get me out of this mess. O that you would help me.

Walter Bouman, a professor of theology and a dear friend of mine, died last year, Walt preached an Advent sermon once that began with a page from *Children's Letters to God.*

> Dear God,
> Are you real? Some people don't believe it.
> If you are, you better do something quick.
> Love,
> Harriet Ann

That's the oldest prayer in human history. "If you are real, dear God, do something quick."

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down": I utter that prayer, or something like it, every morning when I open the paper and read about another suicide bombing in Baghdad, innocent Iraqi women and children killed and young American soldiers and marines, one, two, three, four, six a day. I utter that prayer, or something like it, when I become discouraged that justice and peace and compassion seem so weak, so pitiful in the face of the realities of this world—greed and selfishness and violence. And, as is the case with each one of us, I pray that prayer on behalf of loved ones, dear friends, struggling with challenge or critical illness: for a young mother with cancer; an elderly man facing the final mystery; a family displaced by

Hurricane Katrina, with no resources left; the ten-year-old in our Tutoring program struggling to survive with no father, a mother who's an addict, and no food in the refrigerator.

O that you would help all of them, dear God.
O that you would help me.

It is the deepest yearning of the human heart: the longing, the wanting, the needing, the waiting with which every one of us is intimately familiar.

In an Advent meditation, John Stendahl asks, "Why again these candles and this ritualized longing. After all this time under an unbroken firmament God has not come down, would not existential resignation be more honest and ennobling?" (*Living by the Word,* page 2).

We light the Advent candles and give voice to our longing and say, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" and plead "Dear God, help me," because somewhere deep in your heart and mine we know that God has answered that prayer, that God does answer that prayer. Somewhere deep in your heart and mine there is not just longing but faith that in the birth of a child in Bethlehem long ago, God did come down; that over a baptism one day in the Jordon River, God did tear open the heavens; and that in a brief moment in time as he walked the dusty roads of Galilee and healed the sick and welcomed the outcasts and restored the unclean, as he taught that it is better to give than to receive and that the highest and best any of us can ever do is give our love and our lives away, and that as he died in humble obedience, God, in fact, did tear open the heavens and come down; and that on the third day, when death could not contain him, when the very love and power of God defeated the powers of sin and death, the powers of violence and injustice, when that child, now a man, rose up and walked into the light of the first day of the week, God definitively, once and for all, answered that prayer, "Help me."

Jesus himself once warned his friends that they might possibly miss the coming of God into the world. If they were not alert, awake, and watchful they might miss God's love, God's redeeming, healing, and restoring grace appearing in the middle of life.

Jesus himself warned his disciples that human beings are inclined to miss God by looking in the wrong places and expecting the wrong kinds of divine intrusions. No one much noticed the birth, after all. Informed, intelligent attention was focused on the royal palace, not a

stable. Smart money was on the royal court, not a hillside where some shepherds were keeping their sheep.

The inn was full of noisy travelers, and no one was paying attention to the cow stall out back where a man and his pregnant wife bedded down for the night and the woman had her baby and laid him in a manger.

“Stay awake, be alert, watch,” he told them, tells us. For God comes, will come, in unexpected, quiet ways and only the careful, the quiet, the faithful will see.

Frederick Buechner was in a church very much like this one when he wrote, “Look at the windows that burn like fire when the sun shines through them, and at the image of Christ and the saints, at the flowers and candles, . . . the sounds that break the silence, the organ, the choir, the preacher, our own voices praying.”

He asks, “What is it we are essentially doing in this building?” and answers “Deep beneath all of this in our innermost hearts, I think we are waiting” (p. 35).

And so we wait, and sometime in the weeks of Advent ahead,

perhaps here, as you sing a favorite hymn or carol, or eat bread and drink the cup

or perhaps in the midst of business, a crowded sidewalk, a meal with friends,

or perhaps in a quiet moment, as you remember, as you wait,

Christ will come.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.